

Jeffords feted on education

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WINOOSKI -- A season of accolades for retiring Sen. Jim Jeffords, I-Vt., is in full swing, as demonstrated at a Tuesday ceremony at Vermont Student Assistance Corp. headquarters.

Jeffords announced in 2005 that he would not seek a fourth term in the Senate this year, citing health reasons. While candidates campaign full-bore to replace him, Jeffords is being feted as a Vermont statesman.

A tri-partisan crowd of Vermont political luminaries applauded Jeffords at the ceremony to dedicate the VSAC student resource center in Jeffords' name. Jeffords backed several education initiatives, including Gear Up, a federal education initiative aimed at helping students prepare for the rigors of higher education.

Rep. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., who is among the candidates seeking the seat Jeffords is vacating, said Jeffords took the old advertisement that stated, "A mind is a terrible thing to waste," to heart, working for decades to ensure everyone had a shot at as much education as possible.

Most of the speakers highlighted Jeffords' interest in education, but quickly moved on to their friendships with the senator. "Jim Jeffords is a giant in the Senate and I'm proud to be his friend," said Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt.

The event drew about a hundred people to VSAC, including blasts from Vermont's political past like former Gov. Philip Hoff and former Lt. Gov. Barbara Snelling.

The VSAC resource center is a place would-be students can go to look up financial assistance information and talk with VSAC personnel about paying for education. As dignitaries spoke and the crowd repeatedly applauded, young people in the other end of the resource center scrutinized student assistance data on computers and VSAC employees quietly guided parents and their offspring through the intricacies of applying for student loans and grants.

Jeffords offered brief remarks at the dedication, thanking everyone for the help they gave him over the years. He said it was no accident he focused on education during his political career. "I had a father who was interested in education and a mother who was a teacher. I wanted to follow somewhat in their footsteps and did so," he said.